



Dennis Gruenling

By Dennis Carelli

Mel Bay's HarmonicaSessions® eZine

February 2006

New Jersey native Dennis Gruenling is many things in the world of blues music. If you are a listener to blues radio shows he is a weekly DJ at WFDU. If you are a harmonica player interested in microphones he is a vendor of vintage mics. If you are an aspiring player he is a teacher at home in New Jersey and at a variety of workshops around the country. However, first and foremost he is a very accomplished harmonica player with a unique, swing style that combines the legacy of blues harmonica greats with the swing of great saxophone players such as Lester Young. He has played on stages from New York City to San Francisco, with his own

band, and backing up and sharing the stage with such legendary musicians such as B.B. King, Pinetop Perkins, Snooky Pryor, Little Sammy Davis, Jimmy Dawkins, Honeyboy Edwards, Homesick James, John Mayall, and many contemporary masters like Rod Piazza & The Mighty Flyers, Little Charlie & The Nightcats, Steve Guyger, Rusty Zinn, and Mark Hummel.

DC: Looking at your website you seem to be quite a busy guy; your radio program, custom mics and of course gigs. Where do you find the time to sleep?

DENNIS: What's that? (Laughs)

DC: That explains it. Thinking back, what prompted you to get involved with the instrument and start playing the harmonica?

DENNIS: I received a harp as a gift one year from a very good friend of my family, who also played harmonica, guitar and banjo. But I've always been into music and when I had not succeeded at guitar or at an earlier age trumpet, I figured harmonica sure, whatever. It was a cool sound. Didn't really take it that seriously, but I figured—why not.

DC: Was this when you were in your teens?

DENNIS: I was eighteen or nineteen I believe. Yeah, I think it was eighteen. And actually that was my first exposure to real blues also. The same person [friend who played guitar and harp] had asked for a blues record at the same time. If I bought it for him then I wanted to listen to it since I just got a harmonica (Laughs). And that was that man.

DC: What kind of music were you interested in and listening to prior to that?

DENNIS: Mostly Rock 'n Roll. Anything from 80's Hard Rock and Rock'n Roll. As a young kid I remember being into big band swing and stuff. There wasn't much of that around the house and I didn't really know too much about that.

DC: I was going to ask you about the swing and big band music because *Jump Time* and your *Jump Time* CDs certainly evoke a Louie Jordan and swing feeling. So that was influence with you even before you got your first harmonica?

DENNIS: Oh yeah. I remember hearing the name Benny Goodman and hearing him when I was younger and just being into it. I just remember thinking it was cool music. I can't really trace it back to a particular recording or record, but I remember as a younger kid hearing that stuff. It must have been someone in the family who was into it. My Dad always had country records around. He was a big country [music] fan. And I was into that. So there was music around. But when I heard blues I went—wow.

DC: When did you get involved with a band?

DENNIS: Well, I would say I was playing out after about a year, a year and a half after I started playing [the harp]. It was just with a local band at a local “dive”(Laughs). But you know, it was good experience for me. I remember not being old enough to be in the bar, but I was playing at the bar. (Laugh) Which was cool. Not that I was great back then, but it was basically all I did at the time. Just quit school and really just only interested in doing the music. That's basically all I was doing at that point.

DC: Sounds like that was part of your “wood shedding” phase. That seems to be a common thread with many of the people I speak with. At some point in time they listen and play, listen and play, play and listen until it becomes a part of them like their skin.

DENNIS: Oh yeah. Totally. That was the beginning of that [phase]. But a big transitional point came like a year or two after that when I got into tongue blocking and really started to study the playing styles of all the older guys.

DC: Did someone introduce you to tongue blocking or did you stumble upon that by yourself trying to do some things you heard but couldn't do?

DENNIS: No, I read a little bit about it. I had the little thing inside the harmonica box. Talked about it. A few local harmonica players I met mentioned it. But no one really sat me down and showed it to me. I started experimenting with it, mainly for octaves. I thought that was pretty neat, but didn't understand why I should be tongue blocking other times until I started talking to one or two other harp players who kind of knew what they were doing. Again, they didn't teach it or explain it to me all that well, but they just kept talking about it. Tongue blocking this and tongue blocking that. Then all of a sudden I experimented with it and really started to hear it in the guys I liked. The older guys and the newer guys.

DC: So now you tongue block everything? Low and high bends?

DENNIS: I usually tongue block everything except for the 10 blow. Sometimes the 1 draw I don't tongue block. Sometimes I'll block it to the right. Sometimes I'll block to the left. Sometimes I'll pucker that one. With those exceptions I tongue block everything else, overblows included.

DC: How much of the overblows and overdrawing do you do in your playing?

DENNIS: Well, I really use them as I see fit depending on what style I'm playing. If I am doing a more traditional Chicago style solo or song, I won't throw much of that in there, if any. Though if I am doing more jump related material or swing material with my band and I'm playing in more in a jump blues style, I'm definitely throwing a lot more of those overblows in. I don't overdraw much, if at all. Except for 7. But that still is rare cause I don't set up my harps as much as I should for stuff. But I use the overblows quite a bit.

DC: Do you do your own customization/gapping for your harps?

DENNIS: Well I play [Joe] Filisko and Richard Sleigh harmonicas. But yeah, I do my own gapping pretty much since I don't buy them set up for overblows. I do gap them myself and do minor repairs myself. But they are custom.

DC: How did you get involved in vintage microphones?

DENNIS: Well, I had a mic. Actually I didn't have a mic, I tried out a new green bullet that I thought I didn't like. I then found a JT-30 at a flea market for next to nothing. I was like, wow this is cool. I kind of liked it and got interested in checking out more mics. It really basically came down to buying a microphone from a local player and getting ripped off (chuckle) that I figured I'd start looking for them on my own. Build a collection and start tinkering with them. My dad did some electrical work and I did some electronic stuff at a younger age, nothing major, but I was always interested in how that stuff worked. I just started building a collection and tearing them apart.

DC: Once it starts, it's like a camera habit or something; a want this one I want that one. It goes on and on.

DENNIS: Yeah.

DC: Thinking of your *Jump Time* albums that I listened to and when you play in the jump swing style, you use a lot of lower keyed harmonicas. You play them so saxophone-like that occasionally you have to ask; was that a sax or a harmonica? Do you adjust your technique in any way to play these lower keyed harmonicas?

DENNIS: It's part the range of the instrument and it's part how you play it, your approach and your attack. Technique-wise and stylistically. If I'm going to play in the jump blues or swing vein, aside from how low or high pitched the harmonica is, I'm going to approach it in a more melodic way and a lot cleaner way. Meaning, I'm going to play a lot cleaner notes, even though I'm tongue blocking, I'm not really going to play many chords at all. I'm going to approach it and attack my notes and my phrases more like a single line, a single note player like a horn player would play. Which is part of that sound and the other part, the lower notes definitely help get you a warmer, richer, rounder sound.

DC: So when you are doing that you wouldn't be using bluesy kind of techniques such as slaps and pulls that you would if you were playing on your album CD with Sandy Mack playing the more traditional Chicago sound.

DENNIS: Yeah, right. Because, stylistically, I'm not really approaching it like a harmonica. I'm approaching it more like horn; trombone, sax or whatever. But I've always been into the low tuned instruments; trombone and baritone saxophone. I just like that.

DC: It's very distinctive. If I would hear, and I don't think I am alone in this, a tune with a low harp on it, playing nice clean horn lines, the first player I would think of would be you.

DENNIS: (Laughs) Well, I take that as a compliment. That's nice to know. I remember there not being too much of an interest in them all that long ago. Not that I'm responsible for that, but definitely I think I was really bugging Joe [Filisko] and Richard [Sleigh] to make more of the low tuned harmonicas cause I was really interested in them, years ago. Probably going back about ten years ago.

DC: How long have you been a DJ at WFDU?

DENNIS: I've been doing it about a year and half, almost two years actually.

DC: In that Thursday afternoon slot?

DENNIS: Thursday afternoon, yeah

DC: In that role I know you have done numerous interviews, I just heard you the other week speaking with Jason Ricci, any one interview come to mind as being memorable?

DENNIS: Well most the guys [interviewed] I had met previously before I interviewed on the show. But [Charlie] Musselwhite was really (laughs). He's always an interesting guy to hang out with. I like him a lot. Beside the fact that he's been VERY, almost too kind to me. He was a lot of fun in the studio talking about the old guys. He was almost more interesting in between the spots on the air. He would tell me some old stories and talk about old records he remembered collecting and listening to over and over again. Just really sharing some nice memories with me. He was real sweet. I've met a fair amount of these guys over the years and as a musician myself it's hard either to stay in touch or see these guys when you're busy yourself. So that was a particularly nice moment when I got to hang with him on the radio. I've had Kim [Wilson] there. I think I've I had Kim twice on the radio. He's always cool.

DC: Do you live near the station?

DENNIS: It's an hour and half north of home.

DC: And you were born in New Jersey?

DENNIS: Yes, brought up in central New Jersey, forty-five minutes outside of New York City and an hour outside of Philadelphia.

DC: Have you lived anywhere else?

DENNIS: I did live in New Orleans for about eight months. This is going back probably about twelve years.

DC: Did your music take you there?

DENNIS: I had a girlfriend at the time that was going down there with something connected to school and I figured what a great opportunity to check out New Orleans. That was a big turning point, a big "wood shed" time for me. I would basically lock myself in the apartment and play for eight to ten to twelve hours a day depending on what else I had going on, which was not much (laughs). So between playing on the streets, most of the time was spent inside just "shedding" on long solos day after day.

DC: Besides listening to Little Walter and Sonny Boy, whom else did you listen to as you spent time "shedding" and developing licks?

DENNIS: For the older guys it was a lot of Little Walter, and a lot of Big Walter. And a fair amount of George Smith, Sonny Boy I and II, James Cotton and Jr. Wells. Maybe even more James Cotton than the other guys. I was also getting into the newer guys that I really dug at the time; [Rod] Piazza, Kim Wilson, Paul DeLay and Rick Estrin. I was always into Musselwhite. Musselwhite was really one of the first guys that I heard after my initial exposure to blues. Figure out who the top guys were. Figure out who I liked best and almost listen non-stop and try to figure out what they were doing.

DC: Were there a reasonable number of clubs in your area in New Jersey to see local bands as well some national known players?

DENNIS: There was a local place a few miles from where I lived that did have, for many years, national acts. I saw Bill Clark there. I saw Little Charlie and the Nightcats there. It

was nice to have that pretty close by. But my first exposure, I drove a couple of hours to see Piazza. That was like the first blues show I saw. And a pretty wild blues show to see.

DC: Did he stand up on the chairs?

DENNIS: Oh yeah. This was back when he had a blonde Concert and his Tweed twin [amps]. I was just like, wow (laughs). I couldn't believe watching that show, early on in my life in this kind of music, and was amazed—why are they playing in this small place. I didn't get it. (laughs) You know.

DC: And now?

DENNIS: I still don't get it, but I understand it more.

DC: Yeah. You travel now, performing at some of those places.

DENNIS: Sure. There was another place in north Jersey where I also saw a fair amount of acts. But I would drive. I would still drive far. I saw William Clark dozens of times. I would drive three hours in to Pennsylvania. Or an hour and a half up to New York State.

DC: Particularly those guys that are west coast based who are only going to be there once or twice a year you have to see them when they are there?

DENNIS: Oh yeah, Yeah. And I did. (laughs)

DC: But now you're the performer on the road playing festivals and going to workshops. What is your take on the current state of the blues music scene as you travel around? Is it vibrant? Is it growing or is the audience still filled with a bunch of grayed guys?

DENNIS: (Laughs) Well, that's hard to say. I will say in the past couple years it does seem to have been slowing down a little bit. And I've seen it go through a few phases. I got into before it really hit a big peak and then peaked for a little bit and then slowed down. And now it seems to be on a low swing. As a working musician it just seems that way. There is still a big audience for it, but a lot of other things, other factors involved. People are making their own CDs on their computers. In their basements. People are doing karaoke. Why pay \$15 to see a great band when I can go and host my own jam?

DC: Certainly a lot more competition for people's time and the dollars that people have to spend.

DENNIS: That's true. And I think there is not much exposure for this music to a younger audience. Maybe not entirely but the majority of the audience is still the same people. They're not old people, but they are getting older. They are married, got jobs, etc. People aren't going out as much and it's harder to reach a younger audience with this music because it's not really getting much exposure

DC: I think that's true. Look where you have your radio show, on a college station. Out here [in northern California] it's similar. Blues is played on a few college radio stations and a couple public radio stations. And yet if you watch television and hear some commercials, which ones I can't remember at the moment, and what music is in the background? Blues music. Harmonica.

DENNIS: Always there.

DC: It seems to bring a certain emotional goal they have for that commercial.

DENNIS: Blues is very emotional. People get drawn into it. But the record companies don't want to get behind it.

DC: Besides playing with your band, *Jump Time*, I saw that you play with singer Gina Fox and her band. What style of music do you play with that band?

DENNIS: It's a mix of blues and standards. Old jazz stuff, traditional jazz and standards. Some R 'n B. A fair amount of originals that are in the R 'n B and jazz vein. And we throw in a handful of blues with that.

DC: You can't help it. You sneak it in there.

DENNIS: Yeah.

DC: And people don't even know they are enjoying the blues. But they do.

DENNIS: Yeah, that's right. You know it's funny.

DC: When did you start writing songs? I noticed on some of your albums you had some writing credits. Did that start when you began playing the harmonica?

DENNIS: The music aspect of writing, a long time. I remember making up my own melodies as a kid. I thought everybody did that (laughs). That's just how I think sometimes, in melodies, in music. I would come up with musical ideas or arrangements or instrumental ideas in bands that I have been playing with over the years. I just decided to finally get some down. When I started with *Jump Time* in '98, I started very painfully working on songwriting lyrically. That's developed a lot the past couple of years. Unfortunately it's developed a lot since any other recordings have been out. So I'm not that big on my own lyrically songwriting as far as anything that is out now. But my new stuff will be much better. I'm focusing on that

DC: Are you working on a new album with *Jump Time*?

DENNIS: Yes I am. We've got most of the material. We've had some personnel things over the couple years since the last record has been out. I think I got the right guys and the past couple years have been busy doing more teaching. I've gotten a lot of students locally and I'm happy teaching. I love what I do and if I can share that and get others to do it, then all the better.

DC: Yeah, that's another head on the multi-headed personality of all the things you do. Let's make teaching the last little topic of our discussion. What advise would you give a beginning player, someone who loves the music and is motivated to play the harmonica? And alternatively what advise would you give an advanced player? Someone who has command of some advanced techniques, but maybe has hit that wall of creativity or isn't really conformable in their soloing skills? What advise would you give those two different students?

DENNIS: I would probably give similar advice to both. Similar advice would be: get back or get to have a regular practice routine. It doesn't mean the same time every day, but it means to some extent hold yourself accountable to what you are doing on your instrument. Set goals. Find a way to get to those goals whether it's on your own or with an instructor. Definitely finding a good one-on-one instructor will be helpful, especially if you feel like you are stuck. Or if you are a beginner and don't know where to go at all. Find some way to hold yourself accountable, set goals for yourself and find ways to work for that success. And focused practicing, and I tell new students and students that having been playing for years, makes the difference between an OK player and a great player. Someone that progresses with their playing and someone who doesn't progress with their playing at all. Having some way of making sure that you are developing your ear and your technique as

opposed to just “keeping up your chops.” And take it seriously, just like you would anything else.

DC: How many students do you have now?

DENNIS: I have, I guess, around 25. I have a few that are more out of town and stop by on a monthly basis. But most of them are weekly or biweekly.

DC: On top of everything else you are doing that sounds like you are kept quite busy. I very much appreciate you taking time out of that busy schedule to slide us in here for a few minutes. Thanks for talking with us Dennis.

DENNIS: Cool. Yeah, thanks.

You can find out more about Dennis Gruenling on his website www.dennisgruenling.com.